

How do formal instruction and individual differences influence young learners' L2 English development?

Usage-based theories of language learning have shown that classroom input is not enough to become proficient in a language. For this, formal teaching must be supplemented with informal language learning in everyday settings (Ellis, 2002). Previous research has shown that contextual language learning through out-of-school exposure can lead to large language gains, even before the start of formal classroom instruction (De Wilde, Brysbaert & Eyckmans, 2020; Puimège & Peters, 2019). Apart from out-of-school exposure to the L2, other individual differences are at play when learning a language, such as length of instruction and cognitive variables (Paradis, 2011; Unsworth, Persson, Prins & De Bot, 2015). In this longitudinal study, we aim to investigate how young learners' L2 English receptive vocabulary knowledge and speaking skills evolve after the introduction of formal classroom instruction and which internal and external individual differences contribute to the development of language proficiency. The individual differences considered in this study are out-of-school exposure, length of instruction, L1 vocabulary knowledge, analytic reasoning ability, working memory and prior L2 knowledge.

We looked into Flemish young learners' L2 English development. The first data collection took place before the start of L2 English lessons when the children ($n = 111$) were 11 years old. The second data collection took place two years later, after one or two years of formal classroom instruction (depending on the school learning programme).

English receptive vocabulary size was measured with the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test 4 (Dunn & Dunn, 2007), speaking skills were tested with the Cambridge English Test for Young Learners: Flyers (Cambridge English Language Assessment, 2014). Dutch vocabulary knowledge, analytic reasoning ability and working memory were tested with subtests from the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children V, Dutch version (Wechsler, 2017). Information about the children's out-of-school exposure and length of instruction was gathered by means of a questionnaire.

Results show a considerable improvement of the children's receptive vocabulary knowledge and speaking skills after two years. Even though certain types of exposure, length of instruction and Dutch vocabulary knowledge seem to play a role in children's L2 learning, the main predictor of L2 English proficiency at time 2 was the children's prior L2 knowledge. This finding shows that contextual language learning plays a prominent role in English L2 learning in a country where English is omnipresent and has a high status.

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